# The Real Meaning of Labor Day, Explained

If you've ever pondered what puts the "labor" in Labor Day, this bit of American history is for you.

BY MAGGIE HORTON AND TERRI ROBERTSONUPDATED: JUL 23, 2023
COUNTRY LIVING

Labor Day weekend marks the unofficial end of summer for many Americans. Perhaps you are planning to escape to a favorite lake town or to invite the neighbors over for a backyard Labor Day feast. But whatever Labor Day activities you have lined up for the long weekend this September, how about adding some holiday trivia to the mix? Read on for the history and meaning of Labor Day.

## What is Labor Day's meaning?

Simply put, Labor Day celebrates Americans who labor. It is a day to appreciate the economic and societal impact of hardworking Americans and to reflect on the progress our country has made as a result of the American workforce. Labor Day is celebrated on the first Monday of September every year. It has been a national holiday since June 28, 1894.

## What's the history of Labor Day?

The decades following the American Civil War were a time of great change in the United States. In the second half of the 19th century, working conditions in railroads, mines, factories, and mills were some of the worst in American history. Poor ventilation, long hours, low pay, dangerous conditions, and child labor were just a few of the concerns of the working class.

A labor movement began as a result of poor working conditions at the time. It was the heyday of the Industrial Revolution, and it was not uncommon for employees to work over 80 hours a week on a regular basis. The five-day, 40-hour work week that most Americans experience today didn't become commonplace until the 1940s.

Labor unions started to become more popular as American workers demanded better conditions, higher pay, and fewer hours. Strikes and protests such as the 1886 Haymarket Riot in Chicago, which resulted in the death of seven policemen and four civilians, made it evident that something had to be done.

The Pullman Strike of 1894, so named for the Pullman Palace Car Company, was the first effort to receive the full attention of Congress and the President. The American Railways Union supported the protestors by refusing to transport Pullman railway cars. This had a huge impact on railway traffic, especially in and around Chicago, and caused shipping delays and lost revenue for businesses. Eventually, troops were deployed, violence erupted, and two men were killed.

In an effort to ameliorate tensions, President Grover Cleveland signed a law passed by Congress establishing Labor Day as a national holiday on June 28, 1894. By this time, many states already recognized the holiday. In fact, the first unofficial Labor Day parade took place in New York City on September 5, 1882. On this day an estimated 10,000 New Yorkers did not show up to work and instead marched from New York's City Hall to Union Square in protest of poor working conditions.

Who originally started Labor Day?

Some say that Peter J. McGuire, cofounder of the American Federation of Labor, came up with the idea for this working man's holiday. Others argue that it was Matthew Maguire, secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York. No one is 100 percent sure which of these two labor leaders named McGuire actually founded Labor Day.

Why does the U.S. celebrate Labor Day in September?

When President Cleveland proposed the Labor Day bill in 1894, the date was chosen to deflect attention from May Day (May 1) activities rooted in the socialist movement, says Britannica.com. However, the early September celebration was not without precedent. The first Labor Day parade held in 1882 in New York City also took place the first week of September (albeit a Tuesday). In 1884—a decade before Labor Day became a U.S. holiday—the national labor organization known as the Knights of Labor adopted a resolution designating the first Monday in September as Labor Day.

Canada also observes Labor Day on the first Monday in September, while Japan celebrates "Labor Thanksgiving" on November 23.

More than 60 countries around the world celebrate a similar holiday—International Workers Day—on May 1, or May Day, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. The date harkens back to a general strike in Chicago that began on May 1, 1886 (the Haymarket Riot followed three days later).

Why do people work on Labor Day?

Labor Day is a federal holiday, meaning all government offices are closed, including post offices. Banks, which follow the Federal Reserve's holiday schedule, are also closed, and many private businesses follow suit. However, closures for private businesses are not mandatory, and many big box retailers and chain stores stay open, as do most restaurants. So some Americans still have to work on Labor Day.

Now, while you're scouting out the best Labor Day clearance sales, soaking up the sun, and eating your heart out, you'll know what all the celebration is about and gain some much needed perspective on how much working conditions have improved over the years.